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ABSTRACT

This bulletin highlights how two-way radios are secured, maintained, and effectively used by school security officers, administrators, teachers, and students in New York City schools. Any school requiring faster, more comprehensive communications among security officers and school staff when incidents of violence, vandalism, and theft are imminent or actually occur can replicate New York's methods. (Author)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin 8

Walkie-Talkies Within School Buildings

Summary

This bulletin highlights how two-way radios are secured, maintained and effectively used by school security officers, administrators, teachers, and students in New York City schools. Any school requiring faster, more comprehensive communications among security officers and school staff when incidents of violence, vandalism, and theft are imminent or actually occur can replicate New York's methods.

The Problem

Inadequate and, therefore, ineffective communications among school personnel have resulted in a decrease in the flow of information about ongoing disruptions, the number of available methods for preventing incidents, and successes in handling occurrences of theft, vandalism, and violence in schools. The use of walkie talkies in New York City schools began ten years ago in an effort to expedite and improve communications between school staff and security officers or, in the case of schools without security officers, between teachers and administrators.

Staff from all types and sizes of schools have found it increasingly necessary to go beyond the limitations imposed by the exclusive use of telephones, intercoms, and word-of-mouth. Areas where valuables are kept unattended or where essential machinery and equipment are unwatched, and distant areas on the periphery of school grounds, all come under continual attack from unidentified "invaders" as well as students.

There is a continuing need to have some system of constant surveillance for covering vulnerable zones and people during the course of the school day so that the proper individuals can take measures to ensure the safety of the school's property and population.

The Solution

New York City schools, confronted with severe property damage on the one hand and escalating personnel costs on the other, have successfully enhanced the effectiveness of patrolling personnel by using walkie talkies. Major considerations for other schools wishing to set up communications networks that center around the use of walkie talkies include--

- Determining the persons who will use them
- Choosing the kind of two-way radio to be used
- Training users of the equipment
- Assigning areas where walkie talkies are to be used
- Maintaining the hardware.

Who Should Use Walkie Talkies?

In New York, the persons who actually use walkie talkies vary from school to school. In the larger high schools security officers (numbering anywhere from five to ten people) use them to alert principals who then make the necessary telephone calls to firehouses, hospitals, and other agencies. Where no security officers are on the staff, teachers and the administrative staff person

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in charge of coordinating safety use walkie talkies. Because many people feel that teachers should not become involved in carrying out forms of surveillance and should be limited to the educational function, New York teachers have been instructed to limit their use of walkie talkies to simply reporting disruptive/damaging incidents rather than handling the problem.

Traffic control officers positioned near schools as well as the students themselves are potential senders of news regarding fights, vandalism, and other disruptions. In both cases, careful instructions in the training sessions are important: Directives should go beyond the technical skills involved in operating the hardware and include guidelines for strict reporting to the appropriate authorities.

The rationale for such reporting--whether by teachers, traffic control officers, or students--is simple enough: Walkie talkie operators provide needed additional information on what is happening in places where security officers are absent or have been called away.

What Sort of Equipment Is Required?

The choice of appropriate equipment is important. Two varieties are used by New York's school security and administration personnel: A 1-watt unit, which is relatively cheap , is practical for older, smaller, and structurally lighter schools; and a 4-watt variety, which costs approximately $1,000 per unit, is used in large, new buildings constructed of reinforced concrete and steel.

The current brands include GE, Sony, and Motorola. Motorola is most frequently used in New York because of the large number of distributors and technical servicemen that are available.

In a typical large high school, there might be five security officers as well as two or three school administrators (including the principal or dean of students) using walkie talkies. Since periodic breakdowns occur in the equipment, each school is provided with another two or three radios as backup. Additional purchasing costs include accessories such as batteries ($50 to $60 each), antennae ($8 each) and straps (both shoulder and belt). All told, New York's investment per school comes to about $10,000.

Although there are substantially cheaper models costing approximately $200, these only work for about 8 hours at a time and require overnight charging. They do not carry the same power in transmission as the 1- and 4-watt models.

How Are Staff Trained?

Training sessions are provided for all users of New York's equipment. This training includes sessions on the operation of walkie talkies, technical assistance for ongoing maintenance of the hardware, and security measures for preventing theft and unauthorized use of the equipment. Experienced people should be available to share information on all technical aspects of two-way radios.

New York's training consists of two 2-hour sessions. The first course is an introduction, and the second provides a refresher. Additional time is needed to practice with the equipment. Such organized training, conducted by the technically proficient individuals that purchased the two-way radios, insures that the 10-code listing (used nationwide) and any private line (PL) code used are thoroughly mastered by users.

The training covers--

- Use of equipment
- Use of standard emergency codes (the 10-code system)
- Procedures.

The codes used to report incidents, including special codes, total 28 messages. The purposes of the code signals (in place of messages) are to keep air time free in the event more urgent messages need to be transmitted and to prevent long, garbled messages. The code signal 10-13 (which means to assist officer in a serious emergency), for example, is clearer and more distinct than a long message.

Theft is endemic in large inner-city schools (accounting for two to five percent of the total number of two-way radios stolen each year). Theft can be minimized through instructions given during training on: 1) carrying the unit around, and 2) storing it in a locked place.

Where Have Walkie Talkies Proved Most Helpful?

Areas in which walkie talkies can be used effectively are hazardous zones and isolated (usually far distant) locations on school grounds. Hazardous zones include--

1. Places where valuables are unattended (locker rooms, classrooms while a fire drill is in progress)

2. Entrances where one or more intruders may try to gain entry in order to steal typewriters or projection equipment

3. Locations where the heating and water systems are housed

4. Places where a security person, teacher, or administrator are absent, or where violence or vandalism can break out (cafeteria, locations tangential to school grounds).

Walkie talkies are also helpful when simultaneous incidents are deliberately orchestrated by two or more intruders. Take, for example, hazardous zones 2 and 4. New York is currently plagued by pairs of incidents. When two unidentified intruders appear at the entrance to a school, one may try to create a distracting circumstance so that the security officer will leave his or her station, thereby allowing the second individual to roam at will through the hallways.

It is also possible that distractions can be created by students, within the school, without the interference of outsiders. Students in one part of a school can start a fire while a robbery takes place in another area. The security guard--positioned in only one of these two locations--can focus attention on just one incident.

In New York's training in walkie-talkie use, careful attention is given to how to respond to such tactics. Relaying to another checkpoint that one is leaving a post unattended allows surveillance to continue and action to be taken by others if disruption occurs.

How Is Equipment Maintained?

Technical maintenance is required for radio breakdowns, which are a continual problem. At least 33 percent of the equipment is in continual need of repair or periodic overhaul. Rundown batteries, cracked frames, and normal wear and tear necessitate spending a minimum of $60 per unit (plus parts) per year. However, weighed against the cost of purchasing a new walkie talkie, this cost of upkeep and repair is minimal.

Results

Although no formal evaluation has been made of the experience security personnel, school administrators, and teachers have had in use of 2,000 walkie talkies in New York City schools over the past ten years, the program's acceptance is itself a measure of its success. All the teachers, security personnel, and administrators we interviewed agreed that the walkie talkies are an effective preventive measure to violence, theft, and vandalism and that they have cut down on the number of incidents. According to Lewis Amerosa, the Coordinator of the Communications Unit Office,* their mere presence on a security officer "arms" that individual in the eyes of potential disruptive students--no matter if the officer is a male or female. Walkie talkies are, therefore, an effective deterrent and equally so whether used by men or women.

Required Resources

Resources required to implement a walkie-talkie communication network include hardware, personnel (including security officers, administrators, teachers, and others depending on the discretion of the individual principal of a school), and training materials.

Investment in walkie talkies runs an average of $1,000 per unit, plus approximately $60 annually for maintenance and repairs.

Replication Issues

The walkie-talkie system of communication is useful in elementary, middle and senior high schools. Need and acceptance tends to increase in direct proportion to the number of students in the school. In essence, this communication system provides the additional "eyes" and "ears" that school staff sometimes require in order to stay on top of imminent or ongoing acts of violence, vandalism, and theft.

*School Safety for the New York City Public Schools

For further information on this program, or to request direct technical assistance in implementing a similar program, contact the National Center or the Regional Center nearest you. NSRN technical assistance is available at no cost to requestors.